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By PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

Several years ago, Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert was sitting at a "power" table at Ma Maison, waiting patiently to interview a major Hollywood star. Occupying other, less prestigious tables were the likes of Orson Welles, Jacqueline Bisset and film tycoon Kirk Kerkorian.

"The real mystery, of course, was who the hell was this guy in the pullover sweater at the best table in the house," Ebert gleefully recalled. "I think the presence of me, a nobody, really upset everyone's sense of decorum."

"Finally, my interview, Michael Caine, arrived, and as soon as he came over and sat down, you could just feel the room breathe a collective sigh of relief. Everything was back in its proper place."

Today, though, at least among avid moviegoers, Ebert is a celebrity himself, thanks to his appearances on "Sneak Previews," a weekly Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) show in which Ebert and co-host Gene Siskel of the Chicago Tribune discuss the merits of upcoming films.

When Ebert visited a Hollywood movie location the other day, the stocky, bespectacled critic got the star treatment, with the crew all shouting hello and a local merchant asking for his autograph. "It's really strange when it becomes apparent that wherever you go someone's going to know you," said Ebert, who has been the film critic at the Sun-Times since 1966.

"It's gotten to the point where you're walking down the aisle at Alpha Beta and people demand to know what you like so much about 'My Dinner With Andre,' when all you really want is a can of tomato soup."

Being a TV commodity has its consolations. After all, Ebert's salary at the Sun-Times, combined with the income from his various TV appearances (he also reviews films for the NBC affiliate in Chicago), has been estimated at more than \$200,000.

And Ebert doesn't seem to mind the attention. Eating lunch at a popular Hollywood watering hole, Ebert took obvious pleasure in being recognized by several patrons, who came over to offer compliments and make small talk.

Nevertheless, Ebert, who is accustomed to writing about show-business controversies, now finds himself embroiled in a contract squabble himself. After four

years of hosting "Sneak Previews," Ebert and Siskel have left the program after an acrimonious dispute with the management at WTTW, the Chicago PBS station which produces the show.

Starting this fall, the critic team will host "At the Movies," an almost exact replica of "Sneak Previews," to be syndicated by the Chicago-based Tribune Productions TV system. ("Sneak Previews" itself will continue, with a new pair of critics.)

Ebert insists the switch was not prompted by a salary dispute, though he admits he'll make "better money" on the new show. "Money wasn't the problem," he said. "I was very happy to stay on PBS and, in fact, one of our demands, which WTTW would not meet, was that the show remain on PBS rather than be a part of a commercial syndication deal."

"They just made us an offer we couldn't accept."

According to Ebert, his lawyer (who also represents Siskel) arrived at a handshake agreement with the WTTW management, only to have the top brass suddenly change its mind. "They drew up a bizarre, four-year deal which was totally arrogant and unfair, giving them everything and us nothing," he said. "We refused to sign for the simple reason that I don't want to give the next four years of my career as my donation to PBS."

Ebert also claims that WTTW officials leaked the critics' salaries to the press in an attempt to show "how ungrateful we were." For the past several years Ebert has made \$64,000, though his new "At the Movies" contract is reportedly for at least twice that amount.

A spokesman for WTTW in Chicago said the station management would make "no comment" about the dispute.

Another victim of the contract hassles was Spot the Wonder Dog, who Ebert said was fired by WTTW after his owner asked for a raise. "He kind of blazed the trail for us," Ebert said. Spot's loud bark heralded the show's most popular feature, "The Dog of the Week," wherein each critic briefly would describe his pick as the week's worst film.

Spot, who Ebert said will make a comeback on "At the Movies," proved to be irreplaceable. His first successor, Sparky, died of kidney failure while another replacement, Zeke, often kept the show's 15-man crew

waiting for hours until he could be persuaded to growl out a greeting.

"At first, Gene was against the whole idea," Ebert laughed. "He used to ask, quite rightfully, whether Pauline Kael would work on TV with a trained dog."

Though a team on TV, Ebert and Siskel work for rival newspapers and rarely let their on-camera camaraderie interfere with their spirited competition for stories. "Let's just say we don't ever double-date," Ebert said. "We've been fighting for interviews for 13 years. If I got an exclusive interview with Frank Sinatra, I'd enjoy Gene reading that. And when he got a sit-down interview with Katharine Hepburn, I never heard the end of it."

This guerrilla warfare extends to Ebert's playful sabotage of Siskel's yearly trivia contest at the Tribune. When callers phone the Sun-Times asking for answers, Ebert promptly tells them to "call this number" and gives out Siskel's home phone.

"Sneak Previews'" nationwide exposure has given the pair considerable clout. According to one movie insider, "Tron's" surprising box-office success in Chicago is directly attributable to Ebert and Siskel's rave reviews, both on TV and in the local papers.

This influence works both ways. Ebert admits that certain studios have refused to screen films for him, "usually when they're afraid of a negative reaction." This ban has included such pictures as "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" and "Swamp Thing," even though Ebert gave the latter a positive notice.

"I even got a telegram from ('Swamp Thing' director) Wes Craven, saying, 'Thank you from the bottom of my swamp,'" Ebert said.

Unlike some film critics, Ebert rarely lets his passion for cinema take the fun out of writing about it. His favorite film maker is Russ Meyer (Ebert wrote the screenplay for "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls"), and he has been known to cry at the movies, the last one being "An Officer and a Gentleman"—"Actually, just a few sniffles," Ebert confessed.

Ebert also freely admitted that the real purpose of his recent stay in town was not to work, but to attend longtime favorite Robert Mitchum's birthday party. (One of Ebert's favorite films is Mitchum's "Out of the Past," which he insists is "the best cigarette-smoking picture of all time.")

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PBS-TV "Sneak Previews" co-host Roger Ebert.

And of course Ebert found time to go to the movies here, getting up in time to make several 9 a.m. screenings of upcoming films. In fact, Ebert's idea of a well-spent morning usually involves taking in a double feature at a local movie house, a custom which has been known to unnerve his newspaper editor.

One day, when Ebert was due to finish a piece on a recent trip to the Cannes Film Festival, he decided to see a double feature before reporting to work. After being unable to locate her wayward film critic, Ebert's editor became so agitated that she dispatched a locksmith to, in Ebert's words, "break into my apartment to see if I was still alive."

"It's nice to be loved," he said, "even if that may be taking love a little bit too far."